DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 543 CS 012 869

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TITLE The Relational Dimensions of Literacy.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Emergent Literacy; Ethnography; Grade 1; *Learning Motivation; Primary Education; Reading Instruction; *Student Development; *Teacher Student Relationship; Tutoring; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Learning Environment; Meaning Conditions; Scaffolding; *Tutor Role

ABSTRACT

A study examined what children do within a teacher/learner relationship as they learn about text. The two questions guiding the study are: (1) how does a child's relationship with his teacher help him learn to read and write, and (2) what qualities of this relationship stand out as essential to the meaning making process? An account of the tutoring relationship with the subject of the study, a first-grade student, was recorded in the form of ongoing field notes. Results indicated that shifting to a relational perspective of literacy learning enables a researcher to see and to value elements of the child's literacy learning that goes beyond his interaction with text. The aspects of ritual, physical closeness, shared objects, shared meaning making, and celebration are the themes of the relationship which are common to a child's early language and are well documented in the interactions of mothers and young children. Findings suggest that perhaps for some children, part of their learning to read and write in school is dependent upon this transposition of earlier relational dimensions of language learning to the classroom. Our current conceptualization of learning to read and write as the development of a set of cognitive and linguistic procesess, rather than a personal and social task learned through relationship, may be limiting our ability to provide effective instruction. (Contains 7 references.) (CR)

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The Relational Dimensions of Literacy

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Bloomington, Indiana

American Education Research Association Meeting
Chicago, 1997

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The Relational Dimensions of Literacy

Eighteen eager children enter Mrs. Jenning's first grade classroom and gather quietly on the corner carpet, getting ready to begin their morning shared reading. Mrs. Jennings passes out copies of Jillian Jiggs, their latest group literature selection and a favorite of many of the children.

"Now get with your partner....you remember we did this yesterday."

Mrs. Jennings has a soft spoken accepting style. "That's good, it looks like we're just about ready."

The room is warm and friendly, filled with large charts of poems and songs, plants on the window sill, and student "word" mobiles and poems dancing from the ceiling. The class pets, a hamster and a parakeet, live side by side in separate cages, lovingly labeled "flufe" and "twetee" by children in the class.

"If you'd like to read with me you can . If you just want to follow along that's O.K., but everyone point to the words as we read, OK? Ready."

Pairs of children read along with clear enjoyment as they laugh at Jillian's episodes, supported by each other in their reading efforts. Only one or two seem on the periphery of this shared experience.

Paul sits with his dark brown hair hanging boyishly in his face, alternately playing with his shoelace and picking at a tiny piece of paper lodged in the nap of the carpet. Unlike the others around him, he rarely looks at the book, or follows the text. His

obvious disinterest goes unnoticed by most of the class, and they read along confidently without him.

"We're on page twelve, Paul, let's follow the book."

Mrs. Jennings gently admonishes Paul with a strained calm as if this is a regular and trying occurrence. Somewhat frustrated, his reading partner joins the conversation which has interrupted the class reading by announcing, "Paul can't read, Mrs. Jennings. He doesn't even know what page we're on."

Introduction

The above account of a child failing to engage in learning to read remains an unsettling occurrence in American classrooms. Though recent socio-constructivist conceptualizations of literacy have expanded our thinking about what constitutes effective curriculum to include shared engagement in reading and writing, children like Paul continue to present us with pedagogical challenge. Thus, demands for further research on effective reading and writing instruction continue (Langer & Allington, 1992). Perhaps current models of reading (focusing on children's interaction with text, and the enactment of those interpretations) limit our ability to envision effective literacy instruction (Rudell et al, 1994). The study reported here proposes to shift the current socio-constructivist focus to what children do within a teacher/learner relationship as they learn *about* text, rather than what they do *with* text, and to explore the meaning of relationship in learning to read and write. Two

questions guide this exploration: 1) How does a child's relationship with his teacher help him learn to read and write? 2) What qualities of this relationship stand out as essential to the meaning making process.

Theoretical Framework

From a relational perspective, the teacher/learner relationship itself is seen as instructional, and learning to read and write is viewed both as a complex personal task, and a cultural rite of passage brought about in relation to a caring other. In this model of language learning, the development of skills and strategies necessary for using written language are seen as both subordinate to and dependent on the sharing of the meaning making experience within the teacher/learner relationship.

This view of literacy learning is set in the work of Vygotsky (1978), whose concept of the "zone of proximal development" provides the over arching theoretical framework for my understanding of the role of relationship in early literacy. This "zone" is described as the distance between the independent problem solving abilities of the child and his or her potential abilities under adult guidance. The child fulfills this potential by means of a "scaffold" supplied through interaction with an adult.

In Bruner's (1986) commentary and interpretation of Vygotsky's work, he suggests that Vygotsky himself did not offer

any concrete examples of "scaffolding". He goes on to reconstruct what he believes to be Vygotsky's intentions by offering an account of an adult/child relationship in which a young child's learning of a block building task is guided by an adult. He interprets the scaffolding in this relationship as the adult's ability to "share consciousness" with the child. More recently, Stone (1993) explicates the role of interpersonal relationships in scaffolding learning, suggesting a conceptualization of scaffolding as a "fluid interpersonal process" (pg. 180).

In this study, I empirically explore the nature of scaffolding in a tutoring relationship with a child who is learning to read and write. In addition, I offer an analysis and description of the qualities of the interpersonal relationship that allow and contribute to the creation of a shared consciousness: qualities that seem essential to bringing a child into the meaning making of written language.

Method

In considering how to further my understanding of the meaning of relationship in the process of learning to read and write, I returned to my own teaching experiences and become aware of fond memories I had of teaching children to read and write. I realized that these memories were in fact, a source of information about the meaning of my relationship with these children, as well as the meaning of becoming literate. I decided that to enter into such a relationship again would allow me to

live the experience I sought to understand (Van Manen, 1990). I have, therefore, assumed a phenomenological stance towards methodology in this study in which reflection on experience is used as a primary source of data. The participant's experience of the tutoring relationship as observed by the researcher, as well as my own experience and subsequent written reflections on the qualities were used as an interpretive frame for understanding the data.

An account of my tutoring relationship with the participant was recorded in the form of ongoing field notes, tape recordings of each session, as well as the writing samples, and taped oral readings of the participant. Reflective writing was done after each session, and again after field notes and tapes were reviewed. Tape recordings, field notes and reflective writings were then thematically analyzed. Themes essential to the nature of the relationship were identified and described resulting in the writing of a case study.

As a participant in Mrs. Jennings classroom I tutored Paul in reading and writing, during two twenty minute sessions a week, over a period of eight weeks. Tutoring occurred within the classroom during the regular language arts block.

The following is a reflective account of my tutoring relationship with Paul as he learns to read and write. This account is organized by the themes which seemed essential to that relationship.

Narrative

Ritual/Physical Closeness

Paul looks up from before school play as I enter the classroom. Immediately he goes to the table where we sat last week and begins to arrange things. He moves the two chairs so that they are very near to each other on the far side of the table, just where they were at our first meeting. With some authority he clears away the remnants of construction paper and glue which have occupied the space and looking up to see if I am impressed, finishes the preparations. When he is done he approaches me with just a bit of hesitation, then gives me a quick hug.

I am touched by this display of attention to the table we work at and by the trusting hug I have received. It seems as though reading with Paul last week has had some significant impact on him to have elicited this response after the passing of a whole week. My emotional response evokes memories of reading stories with my own children when they were young. How often my son would pick a favorite book, go to the sofa, arrange the cushions and then call me.

Paul has chosen to express his intention of learning to read through cultural rituals learned at home; the storybook readings of mother and child. His use of ritual to organize our relationship in a similar way, says "this is important to me" in actions we may misinterpret because he has transposed it to the school context. Paul abandons the use of school rituals, in order

to get what he needs; closeness in the sharing of stories. whether in a "read aloud" or "learning to read" context, it is an element of literacy learning Paul values.

It is another Thursday morning and I wonder how things have been going for Paul in school so far. I notice a "progress report" clipped to his cubby. I glance at it long enough to see that it is full of detailed descriptions of times he's "interrupted", "disturbed others" and failed to "finish his work". His teacher approaches me. She tells me that Paul filled in all the bubbles on his standardized test before she had given the directions.

Paul jumps up out of his chair and runs to me with a hug and a smile when he sees me. I wonder if I am becoming part of his problem. Our relationship often seems to conflict with classroom rules.

We sit down at our table and Paul begins to rifle eagerly through the books.

Paul: "Here's one from last week. Let's put it here, where we can find it."

The Farm goes in the corner of the table. The Farm is a book we've read every week since the beginning. We read other, more challenging books first and finally return to The Farm which has remained in the corner of the table.

Paul: "Let's read this one now."

Paul pulls if from its reserved place in the corner of the table and holds it with obvious comfort and pride as he reads the

now too simple text, all by himself. He has assumed a new posture with the reading of this "old favorite". Our arms and legs no longer touch and he sits up straight. He looks at me and smiles.

The special placement of a book The Farm, and the use of this object as a both a temporal frame for the session and a symbol of our purpose(learning to read) is striking. Paul begins the session by searching for this book and placing it in the corner of the table, perhaps a symbolic reminder of the journey into literacy he is facing, a reminder of how far he has come, and at the same time a source of inspiration as he goes forward. He chooses to end the session by reading this same book. The Farm has taken on a level of meaning beyond its common meaning, and becomes a cherished symbol of his entrance into literacy.

The physical closeness so present in today's session, has become part of our relationship. Paul always makes sure his chair is very close to mine, frequently greets me with a hug, and assumes postures that cause us to touch. It is comfortable, not awkward, and again evokes images of my mothering in which the sharing of books just doesn't occur without physical warmth. I think about how often this kind of contact is discouraged in public schools , and how that may affect children like Paul who seem to pair physical closeness with the task of learning to read and write.

Shared Objects/Shared Meaning Making

It's one o'clock, Mrs. Jennings has finished her Read Aloud

and its time for writer's workshop.

Paul: Can we write together?
Researcher: Of course.
Paul: Can I use your pen and write in your notebook?
Researcher: Sure.
Paul: You write first.
Researcher: (writes)
Paul: What does it say?
Researcher: It says "Do you like writing with me?
Paul: I'll write to you now.
Paul writes "yes".

Paul accepts my pen eagerly and begins to write. The classroom "writing center" is only few feet away where there are many available colored pencils, markers, crayons etc. for him to use. Using my pen seems to empower him. His posture changes; he sits up and his eyes loose their sullenness. They shine. After he writes "yes" he goes back and still using my pen underlines all the words that I have written.

Paul: "O.K. We're done now."

Writing with my pen and my notebook is a weekly request. The presence of these objects which represent my literacy seem important to Paul. He "borrows" the physical objects much the same way as he borrows my internal world, a world in which reading and writing are stable processes and consistent ways of understanding the world, on which he depends. The pen and notebook have meaning when they are used by Paul, that they do not have when they are used by me. They become passports to this world of written language, as symbols of the adult literate world.

Paul grabs yet another book from the previous week and

settles back down, shoulder to shoulder, leg to leg beside me as he props the book in his lap.

Researcher: Do you remember what it is called?"
Paul: "No."
Researcher: "It Didn't Frighten Me". I point to the words as I read.
Paul: "Oh, yeah."
Paul: (reads)"One pitch black, very dark night after...right after mother turned out the light, I sa...

Paul taps my leg with his left hand while his right is still pointing at the words on the page, as if to say "I know this isn't right, what about helping me out here?"

Researcher: "Remember that word?" (I point to the "I").
Paul: "I... oh yeah, I look out my window only .... (he glances at me expecting my anticipation of the problem) ... a 'we're in this together' look.
Researcher: "..only to see.."
Paul: "A big blue bear up in my tree!"

The reading continues for more than eight pages with similar exchanges. We end the book together. Paul heaves a sigh of satisfaction as he proclaims "I read the whole book myself!"

This was an exhausting experience. Paul continually leaned on my understanding of the text, of the reading process and of him, and all the while he was leaning against my body. My job, it seemed, was to maintain my own meaning construction while tracking his with enough precision so as to be in the right place at the right time when he needed to borrow my conception of the book and my reading strategies. The "borrowing" of my reading process and the physical closeness of the experience, have had the effect of merging my meaning making with his. His non-verbal requests for help - pressure on my arm, a tap on the knee, an expectant look, not having been placed "outside" of himself

through language, seem to have been experienced as a part of himself.

Paul uses my pen again during "Writer's Workshop". He looks at me often as he writes, expecting me to know what he is thinking which I almost always do. Paul looks up distantly like he is checking his own brain when thinking about which letters he needs for the sounds he hears and is trying to articulate on paper. After a moment of such speculation he glances up quickly at me.

Paul: "RRRRR" What's that?
Researcher: "Look at me, look at my mouth. "RRRRRR" What do you think?"
Paul: "Is that an 'R'?"
Researcher: "Yes."

He puts his hand on my arm with some pressure when he gets stuck. Though he has a story to tell he gets lost twice in the world of letter-sound relationships and looks to me for help.

Paul: "What was I saying?"
Researcher:"You were saying that the bears went to the park"
Paul: "Oh, yeah."

Chapter 4 is written.

As in the reading we do together, Paul relies on me to track his meaning making while being ready to fill in with my own meaning construction at strategic points. He seems to depend on me to respond to his language approximations and interpret them as meaningful. He also seems to depend on me to demonstrate some of the processes he is learning. For example, in trying to determine if the "RRRR" sound was made by the letter 'R' he watched me articulate the sound in an somewhat dramatic fashion

before he could recognize it and then write it. Paul also seems to depend on me to hold the whole process for him while supporting him in deconstructing the task so that it is manageable and accessible. While he figured out some letter sound he lost the meaning of the sentence he had in his head. "What was I saying" was his cue to me to connect him with his own meaning making that I was 'holding' for him.

Paul is learning to read and write. This uniquely human use of the mind is developing in relation to another human mind engaged in his reading and writing processes. I do not simply read or write with him, or offer strategy help (guiding attention to letter/sound or context clues etc.), though I do all those things from time to time. The essential characteristic of our relationship is the merging of our meaning making processes. My continual "read" of where he is and what he might be thinking and struggling with are not my reading of the text, but of him. They are the result of entering into his process, and allowing him to borrow what he needs of mine while he is learning.

Celebration/Rite of Passage

Paul's story is done. I suggest we print it on the computer, "publish" his first story. He leaps out of his chair, disturbing the quiet of the "Writer's Workshop" and nearly shouts, "Can we?" Paul leads me with pride and authority to the computer room. "Come on, it's this way!"

We find room twenty-five, a dark room with red lights

flashing. It is foreboding, and I wonder if we should enter.

Paul: "I don't think this could be it." He seems to sense my doubt.
Researcher: I must be, it's's room twenty-five.

We enter to the sound of the printer. Paul's story is spit out with a whir! Paul rushes over and picks it up. He looks at the page as if trying to figure out if this is really his work. I spot a glimmer of recognition and I wonder what words look familiar now that they are conventionally spelled. Paul looks up at me with unbridled happiness and after a second's hesitation leaps into my arms with his arms around my neck. We are enveloped by his laughter.

I go home thinking about how much this experience was like watching my daughter take her first steps or seeing my sixteen year old son drive away for the first time with his new driver's license in his back pocket. Like my children and their milestones Paul seems ecstatic about his growing self identity. And as with my own children, there seems some indescribable connection between us because I "loaned" him some identity while he formed his. It is as if this experience of writing and "publishing" a story has ushered him into the world of literacy, a world he knew for sometime existed, a world adults belonged to, a world until now his peers were entering without him. He is grateful.

Paul shares his story with the class when writing time is over. His turn comes after the teacher who has just finished explaining why her writing doesn't have pictures.

Teacher: "I just like to write, I'm not very good at pictures."
Paul: "I didn't draw a picture, because I just like to write too."

After he has finished reading Chapter 5 of his bear story he walks proudly to the back of the room where I am sitting and gives me a huge, warm hug and a big smile. It's as if I have given him a gift.

I am struck by how Paul so comfortably compared his "authoring" to that of his teacher by saying "I just like to write too." It seems to be another sign that he has entered this part of the adult world and sees himself as a capable participant in the literacy of his classroom.

I am also given pause by how quickly independence seems to come. As in mothering, the child's need for the adult is intense and brief. The subsequent independence is almost breathtaking, and yet entered into by the child so readily and in the end so "naturally".

The experience of tutoring Paul has caused me to think about how the needs of young children sometimes conflict with our concepts of schooling. It seems that the giving over of one's self in order to enter into the meaning making of a child crosses some school created boundary. Though intense and time consuming, how relatively simple it was to meet Paul's need as a struggling reader and writer in comparison to meeting the needs of the alienated young man he might have become.

Results and Discussion

Shifting to a relational perspective of literacy learning allowed me to see and to value elements of Paul's literacy learning that went beyond his interaction with text. I was able to view his structuring of our relationship as requests for "shared consciousness", and the demands that he placed on our relationship as meaningful attempts to self-scaffold his developing reading and writing ability. From this perspective, new and important aspects of Paul's entrance into literacy within relation became apparent.

These aspects (ritual, physical closeness, shared objects, shared meaning making, and celebration) are the themes of this analysis. They represent ways this child structured our relationship in order to achieve the sharing of consciousness. It seems that once achieved this "shared consciousness" served as a vehicle for Paul's' crossing his "zone of proximal development"; to do those things he could not do alone.

Paul's classroom instruction contained elements that supported children in their reading and writing. The class's "shared reading", in which Paul participated daily is an example of this. However, for Paul the classroom scaffolds were not effective vehicles for language learning. Perhaps the aspects of ritual, physical closeness, the sharing of objects and meaning making, as well as celebration, present in our tutoring relationship, can shed light on the limitations of these classroom structures. The themes of our relationship, more

common to a child's early language and well documented in the interactions of mothers and young children, are not often prominent aspects of classroom instruction (Heath 1982, Snow, 1995; Sulzby, 1983). Paul's transposition of these vehicles for language learning to our relationship is an indication of the discrepancy between the classroom's instructional scaffolds and his learning needs. In this light, his requests for language learning scaffolds that were familiar and comfortable, both verbal and non-verbal, might be interpreted as his attempt to adapt his ways of knowing about literacy learning to the classroom. That he was failing in his attempts to become a reader and writer within the regular classroom structures make his requests for these relational scaffolds appropriately adaptive.

Perhaps for some children, part of their learning to read and write in school is dependent upon the transposition of earlier relational dimensions of language learning to the classroom. As growth occurs within that relationship, other more "school like" scaffolding experiences may be successfully introduced. Indeed, Paul began to use peers for support in his reading and writing towards the end of our relationship, a more school accepted form of help.

Educational Importance

This study encourages rethinking of what it means to learn to read and write within the school context. Examining the notion of scaffolding in terms of relationship may lead us to new views

of early literacy instruction. While all children may not need the transposition of earlier aspects of relation, such as the sharing of consciousness, as vehicles in crossing their zone of proximal development, the continued failure of some children to learn to read and write in their early years of schooling indicates that, for some, such scaffolding may be crucial. Our current conceptualization of learning to read and write as the development of a set of cognitive and linguistic processes, rather than a personal and social task learned through relationship, may be limiting our ability to provide effective instruction. Paul's story challenges the focus of this conceptualization and leads us to value the unique contribution of relational scaffolds in literacy learning.

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